2: Boissevain E-5 (1960-1961) 1965
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[p. 55]

CHAPTER V

The Church and Village Politics

Most Maltese regulate their lives by the daily and monthly cycle of religious activities. The major divisions of the day are rung from the bells of the village church. They first ring the Paternoster half an hour before the first Mass. Then the Angelus bell rings a call to prayer at eight in the morning, at noon and at sunset. The final bell of the day is rung two or three hours after sunset, and is a brief request for the living to remember the dead in their prayers. The call of the Angelus is observed by many. When it is rung, work and conversation stop whether in a government office or a village café, men remove their hats, and someone among them leads them in a short prayer. In Gozo I have seen a busy square become suddenly silent and many people kneel in the street as the Ave Maria was rung at sunset. People also often kneel in the streets when the bells announce the elevation of the Host during a sung Mass, and during Benediction in the evening. And finally, late in the evening, clusters of relatives and neighbours can be seen sitting in their open doorways reciting the Rosary together before they go to bed.

Most girls and women and many boys and men attend one of the three or four daily Masses which are offered in all parish churches between four and seven in the morning. Virtually every one in the village attends one of the five or six Masses offered on Sundays. The few who do not attend are known to the village, and are the subject of gossip and other social pressure. Since the recent dispute between the MLP and the Church, however, their numbers are increasing.

As the church bells mark the important hours of the day, so the principal divisions of the year are set out by the annual national and parochial religious feasts and processions. Besides being major religious occasions, they are eagerly looked forward to as recreational events. Though secular spectacles, such as political rallies, the government-run Carnival procession and, above all, the

8:Brockman T-5 (no date) 1938
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of the eternal and immutable nature of the All-Father whose symbol the rock is.

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THE MONTHS

The Maltese, like the Scandinavians and the Russians, personify the months, giving to each a human character in keeping with its weather. A delightful little story called "The Gifts of the Months" serves the dual purpose of impressing the qualities of each month upon the listener, while stressing the importance of accepting the best qualities in every season without complaining about the disadvantages. Two brothers, one a poor peasant, the other a rich merchant, each meet the twelve months. On being questioned as to what people say about the months in his part of the country, the peasant recites a number of couplets in praise of each month:

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"'Friend,' said January, 'what do people say about January in your part of the world?'[1]

The poor man answered, 'It is a month of rain and of plenty. Vegetables grow and all that your heart can desire.'

'Do you know any rhymes about it?' asked January.

'Just imagine asking!' cried the poor man. 'As many as ever you like.'

'Tell me some, please,' said January.

The poor man then repeated the three following: 'January sits in the cosiest nook in the house. A warm January makes full barns in the summer. The January moon brings the girls out of the caves for they think it is daylight.'

January smiled and the others laughed. Then February took up the running. 'Friend, what do they say about February?'

[1] GALEA AND MURRAY, op. cit.

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'He is January's own brother, bless him,' said the poor man. 'Quantities of rain and everyone satisfied, for February fills up all and brings riches to the peasant's house. In the month of February all mistakes are discovered. In February sow, water, and tend the small-leaved basil.'

'What a lot you know!' they all cried.

'Friend,' said March, 'what about March?'

'Days long and beautiful,' answered the peasant. 'The cold braces you like iron, and a little wind is always desirable.'

The poor man answered in this way each question of the rest of the months, letting his tongue wag in their honour, praising each one up to the skies."

The merchant, in reply to the same set of questions, complains bitterly about each month. The peasant is given a magic cloth of the sort used to cover bread, which provides him and his family with food and drink in plenty. The rich merchant receives a stick which beats him and his wife unmercifully every time it is addressed.

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Apart from the expected, usual characters of the twelve months, there is a method whereby the year's weather may be foretold. The twelve days preceding Christmas Eve are known as "presages." Each day foretells the weather of its corresponding month during the forthcoming year. Here, again, is seen the shadow of Mithra—the "Great Fecundator"—no period could be more ominous than the sacred twelve days preceding his feast.

FAITH

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Where knowledge fails or some error in complying with the traditional rules is made, Faith steps in. A farmer will send for the village priest to bless his fields when he has sown